



Very sincerely yours
Walter Lutton

Three Years in
CALIFORNIA

by REV. WALTER COLTON, U.S.N.

Together with excerpts from the author's

Deck and Port

Covering his arrival in California and a selection
of his letters from Monterey

Introduction and Notes by

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been but a little over four months on the way. The Mormons are selecting the site of their city, which they intend shall be the paradise of the west.

1846
TUESDAY, SEPT. 15. The citizens of Monterey elected me to-day alcalde, or chief magistrate of this jurisdiction—a situation which I have been filling for two months past, under a military commission. It has now been restored to its civil character and functions. Their election is undoubtedly the highest compliment which they can confer; but this token of confidence brings with it a great deal of labor and responsibility. It devolves upon me duties similar to those of mayor of one of our cities, without any of those judicial aids which he enjoys. It involves every breach of the peace, every case of crime, every business obligation, and every disputed land-title within a space of three hundred miles. From every other alcalde's court in this jurisdiction there is an appeal to this, and none from this to any higher tribunal. Such an absolute disposal of questions affecting property and personal liberty, never ought to be confided to one man. There is not a judge on any bench in England or the United States, whose power is so absolute as that of the alcalde of Monterey.

WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 16. The Congress, bearing the broad pennant of Com. Stockton, returned last evening from her trip to the south. She has captured, during her absence, Santa Barbara, San Pedro, and

baffled. I asked what he attempted to run away for. He said the devil put it into his head. I told him the poor old devil had enough to answer for without being charged with his offences, and doubled the time of his sentence, which was only for six months, and sent him back to the public works. He is rather a hardened character, but if he has got a good vein in him, I will try to find it. And in the mean time I shall set the prisoners quarrying stone for a school-house, and have already laid the foundations. The building is to be sixty feet by thirty—two stories, suitably proportioned, with a handsome portico. The labor of the convicts, the taxes on rum, and the banks of the gamblers, must put it up. Some think my project impracticable; we shall see.

will have become the queen of the south in California, encircled with vineyards and fields of golden grain, and gathering into her bosom the flowing commerce of the Colorado and Gila.

] THURSDAY, MARCH 8. The town-hall, on which I have been at work for more than a year, is at last finished. It is built of a white stone, quarried from a neighboring hill, and which easily takes the shape you desire. The lower apartments are for schools; the hall over them—seventy feet by thirty—is for public assemblies. The front is ornamented with a portico, which you enter from the hall. It is not an edifice that would attract any attention among public buildings in the United States; but in California it is without a rival. It has been erected out of the slender proceeds of town lots, the labor of the convicts, taxes on liquor shops, and fines on gamblers. The scheme was regarded with incredulity by many; but the building is finished, and the citizens have assembled in it, and christened it after my name, which will now go down to posterity with the odor of gamblers, convicts, and tipplers. I leave it as an humble evidence of what may be accomplished by rigidly adhering to one purpose, and shrinking from no personal efforts necessary to its achievement. A prison has also been built, and mainly through the labor of the convicts. Many a joke the rogues have cracked while constructing their own cage; but they have worked so diligently I shall feel constrained to pardon

out the less incorrigible. It is difficult here to discriminate between offences which flow from moral hardihood, and those which result, in a measure, from untoward circumstances. There is a wide difference in the turpitude of the two; and an alcalde under the Mexican law, has a large scope in which to exercise his sense of moral justice. Better to err a furlong with mercy than a fathom with cruelty. Unmerited punishment never yet reformed its subject; to suppose it, is a libel on the human soul.

FRIDAY, MARCH 9. There is one event in the recent history of California, which has carried with it decisive moral results. Till the intelligence of peace reached here, a bewildering expectation had been entertained by many, that Mexico would never consent to part with this portion of her domain. This idea, vague and groundless as it was, interfered with all permanent plans of action affecting individual capital and enterprise. To this state of uncertainty the news of peace, which reached here in August, gave an effectual quietus. The event was announced to the community by order of Gen. Mason, through a national salute from the fort; and hardly had the echoes died away among the hills, when its certainty sunk deep and firm into the convictions of all. The result was a revulsion of feeling towards Mexico, which no repentant action on her part could ever overcome. The native people felt that they had been *sold*, and expressed in no measured terms their indig-

Another letter written in June 1847, to his wife.

The Civil Government of California has been reorganized on its ancient basis. It has three grand departments—the Northern, the Middle, and the Southern. I am created Prefect of the Middle Department; this is the highest civil office in it, and the highest Spanish dignity to which I expect to arrive before I leave here and fly back to you. No post of honor or power would, in itself, keep me here a moment. I am chained from a sense of duty; and when this duty has been performed, the chain dissolves, and I am free. I know that in doing this I am acting just as you would have me. You want me to come back at once, but still you want me to do my duty here. I have now, in my capacity as Prefect, five cases of homicide on hand, all waiting for trial; but I don't intend to hang any of them,—this is the poorest use to which you can put a human being:—I shall sentence them to the public works, with ball and chain, for a long term of years. In the United States one or two of them would be hung.

I am now building a prison, with work-houses attached; I am also building a splendid academy and town-hall, all of native rock. The academy will be the finest building in California. Have I not my hands full? But every thing goes on with energy. They have a name here for every thing, and they call your Walter the main-spring: I don't care what they call me, so that the machinery moves with harmony and effect. Monterey is growing very fast: some new building starts almost every day. The scenery around is unsurpassed in magnificent beauty: the thunder of the waves, as they roll and break around the bay, is echoed back by a hundred forest-feathered steep; while Monterey lies cradled between in soft sunshine and shade.

I hope soon to be with you—with little Walter in my arms. How dear to me is that child! He is the star that lights my horizon, and throws its tender rays on my hearth and home. Once more, dear Lilly, adieu!

January 28, 1848, to his wife.

The Government Dispatch over land, by the way of Santa Fé, leaves to-morrow or next day for Washington, and I shall not let it go without a good long letter to you. You merit a dozen letters for your heroic conduct in our separation: you bear up against it with a heart and resolution which honor you much. I am proud to have one who has so much force of character for my wife; forty others whom I know would have given out in despondency; but you hold on and hold out. May Heaven bless you for it, and may I ever love you the more tenderly. Instil the same fortitude into